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A Microcosm of America's Grandeur and Shamefulness

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 intended to showcase America's achievements and aspirations, but instead, it exhibited the nation's contradictions and inequalities. Also known as the St. Louis World's Fair, and located in St. Louis, Missouri, it was a six-month international exposition attended by almost 20 million people across the globe. Celebrating the one-hundredth anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase, the World's Fair demonstrated America's progress by showcasing technological advancements. However, it would take decades for these innovations to reach the households of ordinary citizens. There were also exhibits with racial undertones of indigenous people. On the one hand, "it encapsulated the excitement of the turn of the century [...]" On the other, it offered a stark depiction of the racism and xenophobia" (Fraga) in America. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 falsely advertised America's grandeur.

The technological innovations showcased at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 symbolized America's pioneering spirit, embrace of progress, and forefront position of industrialization. For example, the Buffalo Forge Company presented the first air conditioning unit. Similarly, attendees observed advancements in harnessing electricity that could be used for lighting, heating, electronics, and machines. However, air conditioning units and other technology were a distant dream for most Americans, who were more concerned with survival. Many of the population lived in urban slums or were homeless. For example, 80,000 tenements

in New York City housed 2.3 million people, two-thirds of the city's population (Horne). Most of the population could not afford these great new inventions; they could not even afford a modest home. Visitors also saw how the telegraph could be used for communication; top companies presented how these new machines could instantly produce messages over long distances. However, over 40 years passed before half of American households had a phone (Putnam 166). While the Fair garnered hope and pride within America, it reflected neither the current nor imminent reality of almost all American families.

Not only would attendees have been overwhelmed by the technology, but they also would have greatly enjoyed the food. In fact, the ice cream cone was invented at the World's Fair. Other foods such as hamburgers, hot dogs, peanut butter, iced tea, club sandwiches, and cotton candy were all seen by visitors for the first time at the Exposition. These new inventions improved America's spirit, showcasing how America could progress toward a better world. However, it did not appropriately describe actual life in America: impoverishment. America suffered from malnutrition. For example, pellagra, a disease caused by a deficiency of niacin, emerged in America in 1906 and quickly became an epidemic, afflicting millions and killing over 100,000 citizens ("The Pellagra Epidemic"). "Pellagra has proven a serious menace to the health and well-being of certain classes of the population" (Lavinder 747). Most citizens, especially immigrants and minorities, were living in poverty and would not have been able to relate to the lavish cuisine and splendor of the Fair.

While there was not a concrete definition of poverty at that time, there was ample "evidence of rampant poverty and its negative effects," far higher than in current times (Rohman 882). Destitution and a lack of available healthcare led to malnourishment and disease. The life expectancy in America was only 47 years. In 1900, pneumonia, tuberculosis, diarrhea and

enteritis, and diphtheria caused one-third of all deaths. Moreover, in 1900, 30.4% of all deaths occurred among children aged less than five years (“Achievements in Public Health”). So, while the attendees of the World Fair of 1904 would have been wowed, for example, by the showcasing of the invention of the clinical X-ray machine, the ordinary citizen’s life was shockingly different. Citizens could not go to a doctor’s office and have an X-ray performed for common recreational injuries. The public’s inadequate access to this revolutionary diagnostic tool was a blessing in disguise, as X-rays were not even safe. Ironically, the first person to die from X-ray overexposure occurred the same year as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 (Sansare). The World’s Fair falsely presented to its wealthy attendees the actual state of the nation. The technological innovations showcased at the Exposition symbolized progress and medical innovation; however, a large percentage of the American population was impoverished and unable to garner adequate healthcare.

This pioneering spirit of America, combined with aggressive capitalism and industrialization, combined with the desperation of families to earn wages to feed their families, led to significant child labor in harsh working conditions. In 1900, only 11 percent of children between 14 and 17 were enrolled in high school (Mellander). The lack of education prevented these people from developing into future innovators, contrasting the imagery at the Fair as a burgeoning, prosperous population spearheading the progress of humankind through innovation. Instead, children were sent to factories and farms as laborers to help their low-income families. Working conditions were poor, and there was rampant disease and injury at the workplace. Nevertheless, many capitalistic factory leaders promoted child labor, claiming that if citizens do not work as children, they will grow up to “not work at all, and the nation thereby will be raising an inordinate amount of loafers” (Cox). The nineteenth-century debate over the impoverished

was divided into two perspectives, neither of which was represented in the exhibits at the World's Fair: "those who perceived the poor as lazy, feckless, genetically inferior impediments to social progress and those who perceived the poor as materially disadvantaged victims" (Rohman 882). Ironically, however, the inventions introduced at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 required educated innovators to conceive of them. Once again, the Fair trumpets America's advancements, which contradicts the squalor of its citizens.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 also aligned with the grandeur of Manifest Destiny, the United States' mission to expand westward and overspread the continent. The event was named after the most extensive land acquisition in history. However, despite the large population attending the Exposition, it was physically challenging to reach. Primarily, only the well-dressed, affluent attendees had the means to access the event from afar (Riverfront Times). Ironically, the Exposition flaunted the technological achievements of advanced transportation methods; however, they were prohibitively expensive for most people. Also, the Exposition hosted the 1904 Olympics; however, people worldwide did not have the opportunity to attend due to the high cost and time required to travel to the United States interior. As a result, most of the participants were from the United States. In fact, the United States dominated the medal count, winning 239 medals (Guinness World Records). This was more than the combined total of all other participating nations. Manifest Destiny was still unfulfilled and did not reflect reality for ordinary citizens.

Finally, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 exposed America as a country stricken with racism and a sense of superiority over other cultures. The St. Louis Fair featured exhibits of human zoos that portrayed different cultures and lifestyles of people around the globe. American and Eastern Indians, Africans, Filipinos, Syrians, and many others were all brought to

St. Louis for the Fair (Batchelor 422). On the surface, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition used these exhibits to show fairgoers how these different cultures lived in their native habitats; however, there was underlying racism throughout the displays. The Fair paraded itself as a microcosm of America's majesty, but clearly, the country's ongoing racist undertones were on full display. Fairgoers took photos of themselves with the indigenous people dressed in their own culture in a fabricated exhibit that poorly resembled their home life. The indigenous people were brought to the exhibits "to prove Americans' superiority and technological achievement—showing by contrast how far their nation had advanced over less-developed nations" (Batchelor 422). If America were so magnificent, then the Fair would not showcase the other countries in ways to make America appear better, but rather to celebrate and educate each other about cultures from around the world with mutual pride. In representing America, the Fair unveiled its glory by including exhibits with unchecked racism.

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 was a deceptive display of America's splendor. By the time of the Exposition, "widespread poverty [...] and destructive social attitudes were leading to blatant discrimination and systematic segregation of the lower classes" (Rohman 885). The Fair proudly showcased technological innovations that were unattainable to most Americans, who were actually poor, diseased, inadequately fed, deprived of healthcare, denied childhood, and overworked. Moreover, the Fair presented this fool's gold with a sense of superiority, perpetuating racial stereotypes and marginalizing indigenous peoples. The fairgoers mainly consisted of wealthy and white Americans who had the means to travel to the interior of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 was an impressive showcase of progress, but also a microcosm of the nation's complex legacy of inequality and exploitation.

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